

The Organization of Life

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tribe of the Bush Negroes which owes allegiance to the French. They have never forgiven the Dutch for their relentless pursuit back in the old rebel days. Several years ago the Dutch authorities made an effort to invite the Bonis back into Dutch territory; these overtures, however, were flatly refused.

The derivation of the word "Boni" makes for interesting speculation, and three theories have been advanced to explain it. The first is that the word is derived from the French phrase "Bon Negre" or "Good Negroes" which the colonists of French Guiana applied to the Boni blacks because they were comparatively quiet and peaceful. It is also possible that the tribe may have been named after their famous rebel leader Bonny, who took such a formidable and prominent part in the rebellions. Thirdly, it has been considered that the name was derived from the Bonny River of West Africa, for undoubtedly some of the slaves came from that area. Although *B-o-n-i* is the official Dutch spelling of the word, when the tribesmen refer to themselves the accent is placed on the second syllable, and phonetically the word should be spelled *B-o-m-e-e* and pronounced much the same as the word *Pawnee*, the tribe of American Indians in the western United States. The Granman of this tribe, Awensai, receives his annual stipend from the Governor of French Guiana at Cayenne.

The first village of the Boni, situated on the French side of the Marowynne River, is that of Apatoo nestling at the foot of the Armiina falls. The entire French side of the river from

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an establishment at Curaçao, received permission to deliver⁰⁰¹ slaves to Surinam. In 1673 there were some 1200 African slaves in the colony as well as about 300 English colonists, and 200 Dutch, including Jews.

By this time the Negroes had already begun to desert the plantations and give trouble by raiding, burning the plantations, and murdering the inhabitants. The first village of escaped slaves was situated on the Upper Surinam River near the Bannister Creek under the leadership of a Coromantyn Negro named Iermes.

Gold Coast slaves "were usually called *Coromantis*, from the Dutch fort of Coromantyn or Koromanti near Cape Coast Castle." "The Coromanti slaves," says a historian, "on account of their disposition to rebel, were not admitted into the French or Spanish colonies and consequently found their way into the British colonies, the only market open to them. Surinam was English from 1630 to 1667, and for shorter intervals thereafter.

"These Coromanti slaves," he continues, "were distinguished from all others by their firmness, courage, and impatience of control, characteristics which caused numerous mutinies aboard the slavers, and several rebellions in the West Indies, in fact every rebellion of slaves in Jamaica." Another writer adds: "The Coromanti slaves were always the prominent or sole fighters in the slave revolts of the West Indies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

As many Coromanti slaves landed in Surinam, it is probable that the ancestors of the present Djuka tribes included

- 174 many of these brave and hardy blacks, who rebelled in Jamaica, Haiti, and elsewhere, as well as in Surinam. This intractable and high-spirited nature still characterizes the contemporary Bush Negro, who has the same hardihood, the same impatience of control, that marked the wild Coromantis of the early revolts. They may have been slaves in fact, but they were never slaves in spirit.

The name of these fractious slaves is not unfamiliar; we have encountered it in contemporaneous Bush Negro life.

[716] *Cromanti* now designates a god of the South American bush. The name has apparently travelled from one continent to another, from a Dutch slave factory of the seventeenth century to the Bush Negro villages of the twentieth. Today there are "fetishes to the bad, wild god *Cromanti*."

776 In the person of *Cromanti*, the Djukas have obviously deified their own ancestors. The bad, wild god of the bush is to be identified with the Bush Negroes' *Coromantyn* forbears.

The dancers smeared with sacred clay, whose mad gyrations [787] with whistling bush-knives signified that they were possessed by the spirit of *Cromanti*, were reincarnations of the rebels of the old days. The Djukas' bad demon of the forest is an atavistic memory, personifying the spirit of the uprisings.



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The solution of this problem in my opinion lies in this, that in the first place agricultural methods which are based upon a better and more economical use of the land must be practiced. It is the task of the Department of Agriculture to investigate which possibilities the lands permit and which crops can best be cultivated; it is for this reason that to these observations is added a list of crops, presently in use among the Bush Negroes. A small team of young Bush Negroes will have to be trained by the Agricultural Information Service to familiarize them with the new methods.

Next to that, combating the ants will have to be seriously taken in hand in conjunction with the plans for a modified agriculture. For this, too, people from the area itself will have to receive training, and a permanent work-team will have to be formed. It is unfeasible and unnecessary to clear the entire area now in use. Insecticides such as carbon sulfate, methylbromide, and parathion -- applied with the necessary caution -- could be used with success in places.

/144/ The District Administration will also have to provide co-operation in order to find a compromise between the customary laws of the Bush Negroes and the new regulations to be introduced concerning the use of land.

7. The Cultivated Crops and Their Use

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Although for the most part the cultivated plants are those generally in use as agricultural crops in Surinam, there is still not much known in detail concerning the crops that are cultivated by the Bush Negroes for their sustenance. Giving a general survey of these plants is thus necessary first of all, with a report on the way in which they are used.

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From a more historical point of view it is of interest to point to a number of important plants that are of African origin and have only still remained in use among the Bush Negroes, such as [177] agobe and bongila. Furthermore presumably there are still varieties of ordinary cultivated plants present here -- such as sugar cane, pacove and bananas, species of tajer and yams -- from the

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613 Situation of the lineages in 1958.

[643] The Dikan lineage, whose head is the grand man of the Boni, has practically died out, since it is comprised of only Grand Man Difu; upon his death it will totally disappear (1).

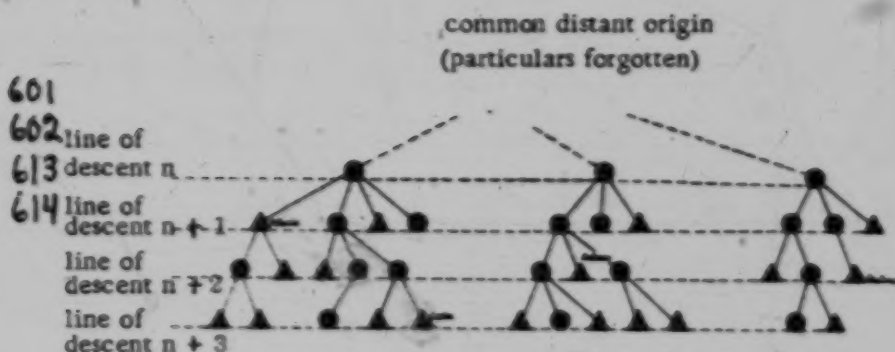


Fig. 3. Extended matrilineage.

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1. Note that a Dikan lo exists among the Djuka; the separation of the Dikan-Djuka and the Dikan-Boni is necessarily anterior to the battles of 1793, which shows the ancientness of these groups.

621 For two generations the various lineages have delegated some
613 of their members /23/ to the grand man to conserve a certain im-
571 portance for his village. Thus Agodé (Boniville) now includes
fragments of the Kotika, Dipélu, Lapé, Dju, and Papañton
lineages, forming that many individualized small quarters in the
village.

/25 cont. /

613 Among the Dju there is no fraction separated from the principal group.

[184] There is also a Dju lo among the Djuka. The word Dju alludes to the Jews, the lineage probably having been born in the plantations belonging to the Jews of Surinam.

The law of exogamy is rigorously applied within the Dju lo. No element of heterogeneous origin is established among the Dju.

613 The Dipélu lineage was the most important in the past;
614 from the point of view of genealogy it is split up into three groups
621 whose members are scattered in three villages, subject to different authorities.

Genealogy	Villages
Dipélu I	{ l'Enfant Perdu Apatu (founded in 1882)
Dipélu II. 1st fraction	{ Kormotibo
Dipélu II. 2nd fraction	{ some elements in Asisi.

613 —Dipélu I forms a unit remarkable for the amplitude of its genealogy, completely known, which extends over eight generations and goes back to a common ancestress named Sanyan, who must have lived in the middle of the 18th century. The common
• [174] origin of the two groups being necessarily anterior to this ancestress, it seems logical to make it go back to the beginning of the 18th century. In spite of the remoteness in time of their common
[601] origin, the members of both groups know with precision their "horizontal" kinship ties (brother, uncle, etc.), which have lost

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121 This is what necessitates as precise an inventory as possible of the population in its present state.

61 Matrilineal groups among the Djuka and Saramaka Refugee Blacks.
114 Authors who have described the social structure of the Djuka and
184 Saramaka, groupings appreciably more numerous than the Boni, have also called attention to the use of the words lo and beg, but give them a completely different meaning.

• 174 The organization they describe can be summarized thus:
571 Before making up tribes, the rebels lived in small groups
621 near the plantations from which they had escaped; these groups of composite origin were designated by the word lo which means: troop, band; the same word is used to designate a band of animals.

[62] These rebels used to belong to all the nations of the west
[103] coast of Africa. In spots there may have been an attempt at regroupings of elements belonging to the same nation, as proven by the village names Loango, Dahomey, among the Saramaka.
[622] But the majority of these small groups were very probably of heterogeneous origin; in each of these lo, the bravest and most capable was designated as head.

[648] After the recognition of the Djuka and Saramaka by the
[67] government of Surinam and their regrouping on the great rivers of the interior, these groups kept their unity since they had a de facto organization and leaders. They were naturally designated by the name of the plantation they had come from. We say for example Dju nenge for the former slaves of the Jews, Kapani nenge for the former slaves of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales /East India Company/. /30/

174 In the course of the 19th century the total number of Refugee
613 Blacks increased very rapidly under the influence of a high birth
614 rate. The lineages in the proper meaning of the term beg, mean-
621 ing the descendants of the same ancestress, took on sufficient im-
571 portance to constitute distinct social units. They grouped in
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- 174 separate villages and the more important even burst out into
613 several villages whose heads were recognized as "captains" by the
614 grand man and then by the government. The number of Djuka
621 captains recognized by the government of Surinam has not stopped
growing; it was 28 these last few years.

571 The lo no longer represented an effective social unit, but
its members kept common worships. For example, it is said that
[188] the Dju nenge go each year as a ritual to get earth from the
Savane des Juifs /Savanna of the Jews/ where their ancestors were
slaves.

[114] This explanation seems probable. The kin-group is not the
only social unit known to Africans; the bond between man and
land has equal importance in their eyes; the fact that their fathers
had lived together, that they had been buried in the same cemetery
created a among the rebel slaves a de facto bond which was able
to suffice, at the beginning of the rebellion, to found villages and
a social organization.

[114] However, this theory cannot be entertained without reser-
vations. It has not been possible to verify it by systematic studies,
the Djuka and Saramaka having firmly opposed until now any
ethnographic investigation involving the statement of genealogies
and the inventory of the population of the villages.

[184] It contradicts what we have pointed out among the Boni.
In that group six great lineages are counted, of which four (Dju,
Kotika, La Paix, Dikan) have a name also alluding to the planta-
tions from which their ancestors fled.

[184] Nevertheless it is certainly a question of lineages in the
proper meaning of the term, and nobody remembers that any other
organization ever existed. Also, in the absence of systematic
studies of the Djuka and Saramaka, the problem of the origin of
their kin groups remains obscure. The future will permit verifi-
ing one or the other of the two hypotheses:

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613 1st. Lo = de facto grouping of rebels of any provenance,
614 which has in the long run split up into lineages but which remains
621 in the form of a common worship;

571 2nd. Lo = lineage, from the very beginning.

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Conceptions Relative to Kinship and Marriage

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[12] Ties between the individual and the ancestors. Before examining
more deeply the social and family structure of the Refugee Blacks,
[184] it is indispensable to study what religious ties are implied between
the individual and the ancestors. Here one is in the presence of
basic beliefs which seem identical in the various tribes of Refugee
Blacks of Guiana and of which their structure is the consequence.

[71] In the civilizations of Blacks Africa it is supposed that a
current of life and /31/ strength circulates from the divinity to
men through the medium of the ancestors. Among the Refugee
Blacks it is taken for granted that in this respect each man is bound
[782] to his ancestors through the maternal line only. If he falls prey
to illness, injustice, or adversity, he can call only on them in
his prayer.

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[827] That does not mean that the tie with the father is ignored
or considered as having little importance; it is taken for granted,
as we shall see, that in the creation of man certain psychic ele-
ments are transmitted from father to son. But the current of strength
binding the individual to the ancestors does not pass through the
father. One cannot pray usefully to the soul of one's dead father.

[755] If I am sick and divination incriminates the action of my dead
[782] father's soul, I cannot address either prayer or offering directly to
him; for that I shall have recourse to one of his near relatives in
the maternal line.

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This organization, compared with what is found in the greater part of Africa, is very advantageous for the wife, who enjoys total independence. But against this she has great instability of unions.

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The union of man and woman has so little of the character of a marriage that in the Boni language no word exists which means, strictly speaking, "husband" or "wife." They say: mi libi anga X = "I live with So-and-so."

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How has the social and matrimonial system of the Refugee Blacks been set up? One could believe that one of the systems of Western Africa was purely and simply transposed, but this is not the case at all. In this domain as in that of beliefs, the ancestors of the Refugee Blacks elaborated an original synthesis out of numerous sources.

The African nations from which the rebels issued were certainly, in large part if not in the majority, patrilineal. This is especially the case of the Fon of Dahomey, from whom have been borrowed important cultural elements, especially the principal cults of possession. The matrilineal ones all conceded patrilocal residence, that is, the wife's leaving her village and settling in her husband's village.

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The 18th-century rebels, the archives attest, included a heavy percentage of "salt-water Negroes," born on African soil; such, for example, was Cedio Coromantin, one of Boni's lieutenants; those who had not been born in Africa had, for the most part, been instructed in an African tradition by a father or uncle. One can be sure that once having attained freedom they sought to organize their villages according to the family custom by which they had been brought up, that is, to set up, some a patrilineal and patrilocal society, others a matrilineal society /36/ but with patrilocal residence. We know for example that Boni had chosen his son Agosu as his successor.

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Family custom is a thing tenacious in other ways than a language, a technique, indeed a cult. Men cling desperately to the social and matrimonial system they have received, with the feeling that if they abandoned it their familiar universe would crumble. Do we not see nowadays in the big African cities groups completely separated geographically from their tribe of origin, subject sometimes for several generations to European influence, maintain fiercely their matrimonial system? Yet in all the tribes of Refugee Blacks patrilineal filiation prevailed nowhere at all, and patrilocal residence disappeared, it seems, rather rapidly; the problem cannot be dodged by facile explanations such as the influence of slavery or the rarity of women among the rebels (1).

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1. The rebel groups were quickly balanced from a demographic point of view, for they went and carried off women from the plantations.

One must assume that fundamental reasons made the patrilineal groups less viable than the others and finally led to their dissolution. These reasons appear to be of two orders:

—The independent spirit of the African woman, concerned above all with her freedom with respect to the man;

—The moral and religious law under which the unification of the tribes of Refugee Blacks was brought about, implying rejection of any form of violence or oppression. Under this law it could no longer be a question of taking the wife away from her maternal village if she was attached to it, no more than of coercing her to make her live in a union which had ceased to please her.

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The formation of patrilineages must have been hampered by numerous divorces; in addition, in case of divorce, the wife unquestionably aspired to take her children with her, not recognizing any contract between the two groups of kin which might be able to affect her free will; one can also be certain that the children, if consulted, must have followed their mother in most cases and joined their maternal kin group. This tendency remains perfectly observable in our day; we shall see all its importance when we study how the children are raised and what tutelage is exercised upon them.

Now there is no patrilineage conceivable, if, in case of divorce, the children do not stay with the father. Patrilineal societies exist in which the wife is free, were it only the Peule society, where divorces are very frequent. But African custom has it that in a patrilineal system, by reason of payment of the dowry, the wife's kin lose all rights over the children. They have entered the man's kin group and his ancestral cult.

The formation of matrilineal and patrilocal groupings must also have collided with analogous difficulties, the women not willingly leaving their village of origin.

One can rather easily imagine that in the initial period of the formation of the /37/ new tribes, the different matrimonial systems coexisted; then the patrilocal groups, less viable, progressively broke up, while the present custom was being established.

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This point of view is confirmed by an exact piece of information collected at the end of the 19th century by the explorer Coudreau. Upon the death of Agosu, son of Boni, it was his son Gongo who succeeded him. But after the death of Gongo, the succession went according to the matrilineal system.

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Another important aspect of the matrimonial system of the Refugee Blacks is the absence of any compensation or payment. Even if it happens that a woman leaves her lineage permanently in order to settle in her husband's village and found a family there

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621 Case of the village of Boniville. This village constitutes an
613 especially interesting case, for it brings together small fractions of
• [174] the various lineages permanently settled there. It helps one to
understand what the territorial implantation of the Refugee Blacks
may have been toward the end of the 18th century at the time when
their institutions were developing.

621 The principle is that the Boniville lands belong to the grand
613 man, the last representative of the Dikan lineage; he granted
423 individually to the inhabitants of the village the right to farm his
[643] lands. These inhabitants thus hold only a right of use, and there
can be no competition among them for the possession of the real
[425] rights. But the principle of transmission of the right of use in the
same lineage remains for each clearing taken separately. For ex-
ample, Klémenti (Dju, F7), who made a clearing out of primary
forest, concedes that after him his land may be occupied by any
member of the Dju lineage residing in Boniville, but not by Dju
lineage members living in Asisi. /81/

423 Few in number on a relatively extensive territorial sector,
621 the inhabitants of Boniville have not felt the need to divide the
sector granted by the grand man into precise territorial zones.
423 It is difficult to foresee what will happen after the death of Grand
425 Man Difou when the rights of use will be transformed into real rights.
613 It is probable that a territorial division among the fractions of the
lineage established in Boniville will be imperceptibly created by
the simple fact that competition will arise among them.

423 Fishing, hunting, gathering, and mineral exploitation rights.
These rights are totally separate from the right to farm; in this
respect the conceptions of the Refugee Blacks reveal the precarious-
ness of the bonds between the individual and the soil, which re-
sults from ecological conditions.

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What constitutes the religion of the Refugee Blacks is a synthesis of elements originating with various peoples of West Africa, especially the Ashanti, Agni, Mina, and Fon and also Congolese elements. This synthesis seems to have been born among the Saramaka, the first tribe formed at the beginning of the 18th century, and to have been adopted thereafter with modifications of detail by the Djuka, tribe created about 1760. The Boni, the last tribe formed, probably received these beliefs during the time of slavery which they spent under the tutelage of the Djuka, from 1815 to 1860. The beliefs of the Boni and those of the Djuka have an identical base; the rites and their effects on social life are exactly the same. Nevertheless, the Djuka, almost ten times more numerous, have been able to keep very differentiated conceptions and specialized cults, involving priests in the literal sense of the term.

The Boni have kept only the essentials, and many conceptions, especially the myths which serve as support for the whole tradition, are very much blurred among them.

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The Boni like to imagine that Africans constitute only one nation, and that they have inherited in a lump the traditions and social forms of this nation. They know now (especially from having seen a good deal of the Senegalese riflemen of the 1937 French mission) that numerous tribes exist, but that has not shaken the veneration they have for Africa, source, for them, of all knowledge and all strength. However, almost nothing of the culture peculiar to each one of the great tribes has reached them; no name of an African nation has remained in their memory, and /192/ none of the languages of their land of origin has been kept (1); everywhere the vehicular language

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1. One observes, however, that a certain number of disconnected details of African life have come down to them by oral tradition;

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thus it is that they have kept a rather exact description of the elephant (leu) and the gorilla (malégwana).

[648] imposed on the slaves has prevailed. There is nothing surprising about that, since the slaveholders tried, in order to prevent revolts, to mix to the maximum the Blacks of the various tribes.

- 174 A certain number of men initiated in differing degrees into African cults were among the rebels. They tried to con-
177 serve and transmit these rites, which their descendants have more or less transposed or deformed (2). As far as one can

[182] 2. The single fact that the vegetation and fauna differed totally from those of Africa immediately required a modification of ritual which called for infusions of leaves of numerous plants to which definite magical properties are attributed.

[198] As far as one can judge by the secret languages attached to these cults, in which are recognized many words deformed from the ordinary language, and a few Indian words, these cults in their present state must

[178] differ appreciably from the ones which gave them birth. In fact, the only thing the Refugee Blacks have authentically kept is concepts, metaphysical and moral ideas.

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[177] This is precisely what constitutes the great interest of the Refugee Blacks' religious forms, which one finds again, besides, in large measure, mixed with Christian ideas, among all the Blacks of South America. They seem to point out a very important common background of conceptions common to the West African civilizations.

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184 It is certainly not by chance if the various tribes of Refugee Blacks have adopted such close social and religious forms. One must assume the action of several strong personalities who knew, with an almost superhuman instinct, how to sift out from the jumble of beliefs brought by the rebel slaves what was necessary to the life of the new society; but this new religion would not have taken root in forms so stable and so coherent if all had not been intimately conscious of being in agreement on a minimum of common concepts.

[177] It is important to observe that the Refugee Blacks, who borrowed most of their techniques from the Indians and Europeans, remained rigorously faithful in their beliefs and rituals to the African substratum, from which they drew a homogeneous and living whole. Although the beliefs of the Indians are known to them in their main lines, they have borrowed almost nothing from them; on the other hand, it is certain that vague Christian recollections influenced the conception they have of the supreme god, Masa Gadu, and their moral and religious law. But they have been introduced into an African system of thought, and in fact the beliefs which directly influence individual and social life come in a straight line from the African earth.

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[171] Metaphysical conceptions. Through the rituals of the Refugee Blacks appear /193/ metaphysical conceptions very comparable to those which have been noted in the populations of West Africa.

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The Kumēnti. These gods are common to the Saramaka (Kromenti) (1), Djuka, and Boni. The Kumēnti are considered

- [174] 1. There is no doubt about the origin of this word; it is a deformation of Coromantin, name given in the 18th century to Ashanti country. The "Coromantin Negroes," reputed to be particularly intractable, played a large role in the slave revolts. The Kumēnti cult of possession must originally have been a cult peculiar to the Coromantin nation.

[562] to be benevolent gods and friends of men, so their possession is very much desired. They do not come into men spontaneously, they are obtained only by applying to a teacher. In principle only men can obtain Kumēnti, while on the other hand only women can have Būnzunki /sic/.

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751 The Kumēnti are specialized in protection against fire and against machete and gun wounds. These dangers hold the largest place among the anxieties of the Refugee Blacks, who spend almost all their life in the bush and with whom nearly [189] all sores become infected and have serious consequences. Thus the Kumēnti cult holds an important place in their magic; even someone who is not possessed will try to obtain from these gods an obia that will protect him from these various dangers.

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786 The instruction of the disciples of these gods takes as its [533] pattern the procedures described above, but the collective dances appear to play an essential part. The teacher calls on the gods by beating a special rhythm on ordinary drums (apinti) and by [534] uttering invocations punctuated by the rattle of the saka (Indian maraka, that is, hollow calabash provided with a handle and containing seeds).

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[174] White clay, pemba (the word and the rite are of
Congolese origin), does not undergo any special preparation.
In the thought of the Refugee Blacks it has the power to fix
upon a man's body the magic influence of the infusion of leaves.

791 Among the Boni, except for the cult of Odun, there are
no priests, strictly speaking, invested with a function at the
same time social and religious. A large number of persons
are regarded as "knowing remedies." This notion implies at
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791 once knowledge and power. In general the obiamā is believed
to hold only a specialized power: for example, he knows how
to prepare a hunting obia, or an obia for protection against
wisimā. This power he received from his father (as an ex-
ception, it seems, from his uncle), who instructed him, before
dying, in the specialized rites it requires and transmitted
his power to him by giving him mula.

To give mula to someone, one blows into his hands,
one puts them on his head while uttering a formula by which
one transmits to him a certain power or piece of magic
knowledge.

What is the criterion of legitimacy? Who has the right
to call himself an obiamā? It seems that basically everything
is reduced to this: the obiamā has the conviction, the sensation
that he holds this power; as for his clients, they believe they
observe the efficacy of his obia; if they stop having confidence
in his remedy, they will abstain from coming to ask it of him,
that is all; no social prohibition comes to limit the action of
the obiamā. The grand man intervenes only against someone
[754] who might claim to hold remedies to harm another person or
to capture his will, which would be wisi.

[888] /249/ The Boni accept the possibility of deception as regards
obia, especially by people who are too young, but they have
the conviction that the elders (people over 55-60) possess
wisdom and that one can apply to them with complete confidence.

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[765] audience and to create an atmosphere of participation in the rite.

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[765] This ritual character makes it so that the Anansi Toli cannot be recited any time and in any old way. The storyteller may speak only at night, in the presence of a respondent and of an audience of at least two or three persons. A ritual formula: "dirinti" -- the response of the audience: "ndaeti," precedes each new story. It is only with extreme repugnance that informants consent to listen to and comment in the daytime on a tale recorded on tape, particularly if their parents are still living, for it is said among the Refugee Blacks as in Black Africa that telling stories in full daylight makes one's father and mother die.

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[177] These tales belong to an authentically African accumulated store, practically unchanged in spite of the borrowing from the Creole Blacks of Paramaribo of several themes concerning automobiles, steamboats, etc., inserted in droll fashion into the traditional themes.

The usual hero of these tales is Anansi, the crafty one.

[825] Anansi is the name of the Mygale spider (1). It is noteworthy.

[171] 1. The spider cycle is characteristic of the Akan (Agni-Baoulé-Abron) culture area. Anansi is the name of the Mygale spider among the Agni.

however, that this spider does not appear to play any special role in the beliefs of the Refugee Blacks and that no divinatory power is attributed to it. In fact, in the tales of which he is the hero, Anansi is nearly always represented as a man.